

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

The Progress and Pitfalls of the Terrorist Watch List

November 8, 2007 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing entitled “The Progress and Pitfalls of the Terrorist Watch List”:

“When most people hear about the terrorist watch list, they think of flying – and of the no-fly list they hear about on TV. Many probably think about getting the dreaded “S” on their boarding pass, which means they get secondary screening. But the watch list is much broader than that.

It is used by many “consumers” beyond the TSA, including Customs and Border Protection, the Department of State, and other Federal, State, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies.

The title of today’s hearing really says it all – Progress and Pitfalls. In the almost four years since the Terrorist Screening Center was created, we’ve seen some real progress in taking multiple different “watch lists” and combining them into one functioning list.

And we’ve stopped some really bad people from getting into our country. For these feats, Director Boyle and his employees are to be commended.

But we’ve also seen the pitfalls of maintaining such a list. We’ve seen it grow exponentially and we’ve heard growing concerns about the quality of some of the data.

And we’ve received reports from the GAO and from the Department of Justice Inspector General that raise serious issues that must be resolved if the watch list is to continue to expand. We have heard the stories about all the false “hits” against the list, including my good friend Congressman John Lewis as well as the young children of some of my own staff.

We can do better – and we have to do better – than to have a system that flags United States Congressmen and 2 year olds as potential terrorists. Every day, the watch list impacts real people who are traveling by air, land, and sea. An accurate watch list keeps our nation safe and keeps the bad guys out.

An inaccurate and incomplete watch list creates more and more misidentifications – which in turn creates fear and frustration. The American people will support the watch list if there is accountability – if they are confident that mistakes are being fixed and there is a real redress process.

If there is accountability, they will trust it’s being done right, not fear that they’re being monitored by Big Brother.

Conversely, if there is no accountability, the watch list will sow fear. And fear is not security. Quite the opposite, fear is the lack of security.

If the people lose faith, the watch list will go the way of color-coded terror alerts and become fodder for late night comedians rather than reassurance that the United States government is protecting its people.

It will be viewed as a placebo, not a protection. The 9/11 Recommendations bill that became law this year took an important step towards creating some accountability. It created an Office of Appeals and Redress within the Department of Homeland Security.

That office is supposed to establish and administer a timely and fair process for airline passengers who believe they have been impacted because they have been misidentified against the "No Fly" or "Selectee" watch lists. Yet to date, the Department has not related what progress has been made in creating this important office."

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